

After The Long Winter

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Summary: There were two strangers John felt like he should recognize in the team sent to get him from the LZ. A oneshot sequel to If There Are Wolves Among The Stars, set during the events of Halo 4.

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Six followed her morning rituals with a contented discipline; showered and dressed in uniform, made her bed, picked a pinch of sugar out of the canister on the tiny shelf beside it. Scrolled through her data pad looking at ship-wide messages that came in during her assigned sleep cycle. She opened the door to find the blue-purple tentacle at eye height, slowly luminescing.

The Engineer accepted the sugar with some grateful jiggling. Six supposed she shouldn't have fed it so often; all of the Engineers on Infinity were built by their peers for very specific purposes to do with the maintenance of the massive ship. It was the Engineer and its peers' own fault that they were so cute and affectionate, though, and this one was on its way to the Shaw-Fujikawa drive. It always continued on to work after its brief visits. Six checked with the humans in Engineering about that.

On the way to the mess, she called out "Good morning, Aine," to a speaker high on the wall.

The ship's AI replied further down the hall, one speaker later. "Good morning, Aislinn."

Aislinn smiled, and she was still smiling when she entered the mess.

A human lieutenant passed her, looked over his shoulder. "Happy this morning, ma'am?"

"Still alive," Six said.

The lieutenant gave her a disbelieving smile.

Behind her, a familiar voice traded brief words with another trooper, and the lieutenant waved.

Jorge nodded. He wasn't quite awake yet; Six could tell by how rapidly he blinked, taking in the gradually filling mess hall as more crew members switch shifts. The ritual continued, and, for the first time in days, there weren't any Spartan-IVs wanting war stories, or atypical training, or debriefings, or the small crises that pop up on a miles-long mobile base. She followed her rituals: kiss Jorge, eat breakfast, salute or nod at the gregarious fours who pass her. Listen for Aine. Gym.

* * *

><p>There were two strangers John felt like he should recognize in the team sent to get him from the LZ and cut a swath back to the Infinity. They weren't Palmer's gray-armored Spartan-IVs. They had emerged from the same place, deep in the endless wrecked _Infinity, _but they weren't the same. There was something off about the way they fought, too, a different rhythm.

It had been a long journey through the jungle, bottled up in his armor after the even longer journey through cryo, and even seeing other human beings was a slight shock of recognition for John, an awe in regard to the fact that he knew how their arms bent and how their spines moved. His normally detailed vision was enhanced by interest.

It didn't take him long, maybe one exchange, to figure out that the two strangers fought like the people he used to work with a long, long time ago. They threw themselves into the largest group of Covenant so they could do the most damage, pacing themselves always with the air of barely contained momentum.

They fought like Spartan-IIIs.

Spartan-IIIs were preservationally challenged, disregarding their own safety because they knew how much they could take. These two waded in side-by side, using turrets torn from the ground. Asymmetrical twins, they pushed through lines of Grunts and Jackals while John and Cortana targeted Knights and lupine, orange-dripping Crawlers. John didn't recognize their armor.

They don't want to talk, during that battle.

Fifteen long minutes later John climbed into a Mantis mech. The hand-holds and controls were unfamiliar, marked with yellow and black for dangerous and gray-green for safety just like every bit of UNSC equipment he had ever used. The machine swayed and stepped forward at his command, green and yellow status lights reflecting on his mask and just as quickly being wiped away by UNSC dampeners, to be replaced with shields and radar almost identical to his own. The pilot's compartment was cramped, the seat pressing against his legs and his knees edging up to the low, transparent screen. It was made to be used for regular marines or those Spartan-IVs and threes, meant

to be armor for people who couldn't wear it.

He crushed Covenant with unfeeling feet, pounding at the decking. The ship resisted his attempts at destruction even as Covenant blood spattered the hallways in lurid colors and faintly glowing streaks. Dust plumed, but the Infinity did not crack.

The mech shouldered through hallways that almost seemed too small for its stride. In one corridor leading between an armory and an atrium he saw, suddenly, a small yellow life-sign. Bulkheads were spaced evenly along the corridor, like marching soldiers. Nothing moved by his feet, and he pictured a man crouching next to the wall, frightened of the stamping Mantis.

"There's a friendly in there," he said to Cortana. "Do we have time?"

"Del Rio won't like it," she said.

He swung out of the cockpit, sweeping the sides of the hall with his radar gaze to be sure no enemies were in range to steal the machine while he was gone. The IFF beacon held still behind a door, and John knocked before moving in, gun first but his finger on the trigger guard and the mouth pointed at the floor. If somebody was panicking in here, he might need to mark the spot for a pick-up later.

The face that looked out at him had four purple-gray segments and small, black eyes. Around its neck hung a plastic access card with an Elite mugshot on it.

"My name is Relk 'Forsov," it announced in thick standard English.

John shuffled forward. "Do you work here?"

"Yes. I am a..." The Elite fidgeted with spidery fingers. He was armed with a battle rifle magnetized to his big, reverse-jointed left leg, but didn't reach for it. "A consultant."

"He checks out, Chief," Cortana said in John's ear. "He's part of the crew."

"Are you part of the crew?" Relk asked, not seeming to mind the AI voice appearing without any corporeal projection.

"We're working on our own," John said. "But we're with the UNSC."

"Me too," Relk said, with an exaggerated sigh as if even after Cortana had verified him, the Chief's alliance had been in question.

They both paused. John had all the information he needed, and while Relk started to form words a few times, he eventually shut his mouth again without finishing them.

John said, "There's only room for one in the mech."

"I'll stay here!" Relk practically jumped in excitement. John would have been nervous if he didn't think of the Elite as a skinnier, more hesitant Arbiter, and the ship had not yet been regained. John did

his job, and after that there were more pressing things to think about.

Del Rio wanted boots off the ground, and an abandonment of the research. Code yellow meant that instead of marines running around the ship there were techs and mechanics running around the ship. Cortana shared what information she could, pulling out some of the research Doctor Halsey had done aboard the ship and comparing it with her own. She talked about her mother-creator with a sardonic reverence, glad that the woman was still alive in a way that, just as Halsey would do, prioritized the data over its compiler.

John saw Sarah Palmer long enough to learn a little more about the defensive capabilities of Infinity, and listened quietly as Cortana whispered gentle theories and equations.

And he met the first Spartan-II he has seen in years.

They sat in a small game room near the bridge, John and the woman once called Noble Six, and Jorge, all of whom had gathered as curious onlookers to each other. An old guard while the Spartan-IVs commanded themselves.

"Earth," he asked, as soon as he got the chance. After the firefight was over, while the quiet, cold spark of Cortana was sitting, alert, inside his head, John-117 asked. Not because he was wondering, although he was, the small part of him that maintained loyalty to the place where his ancestors had tilled the ground for untold years.

"Not doing well. Kenya... And there's a scar all across Nevada." The Spartan-II shook his helmeted head. John had swiped a smile across his faceplate minutes ago.

"The places where they thought the aliens landed." The Spartan-III cocked her hands on her hips, tilted the pert, titanium jaw of her mask.

"I was there on Tsavo Highway," John said.

Jorge nodded appreciatively. "A lot of us didn't think we'd live through Reach's Winter Contingency," he said. "And now this." Head shake, cavernous breath. John nodded, disinterested in speculation.

"John-117." Six sounded awed. "We thought you were dead."

"I get that a lot."

Six laughed, then stopped herself. "That was a joke, right?"

John didn't answer her. He blinked and felt sand in his eyes as if he had just woken up. Really, he was probably pale and dehydrated from living in his suit for so long, a metabolic stiffness compounded by the strange wilderness of Requiem.

John said, "I need to get to Doctor Halsey."

He knew she wasn't on Earth; now he needed to know where she had gone. All the talking was just a distraction. Cortana manifested,

sitting on the table looking into the distance while she examined invisible files full of the data gathered by her maker.

The two Spartans swiveled their heads, looked at one another, then back at him. They unfastened their helmets with little decorum, as if taking off hats at a funeral.

"The doctor ain't here," said Jorge.

John said, "Where is she?"

Six and Jorge looked at one another again. "They won't tell us," he said. Her look was sympathetic; had she been fond of Halsey?

"She's still working on something," Six said. "But the brass don't trust her."

"She helped us out on Reach," Jorge said.

"I know," John said, although it's really Cortana who knew, and fed the information down to him. Halsey's daughter and Halsey's favorite looked at the man and woman who helped Halsey leave a dying planet.

If they didn't know anything more about the Didact than he did, he would need to go back to the jungle over Requiem's hollow shell and find an answer himself. Cortana looked steady in front of him, but he could feel her shakiness in the back of his head even as she comforted herself with a problem to solve. What had the Librarian said, about his genetics and his creation?

He looked up as footsteps padded toward him. They sounded soft, even sticky like some lizards' feet. He recognized the claw clicks, though. Other, human footsteps in a more distant hall invaded his attempts at detective work; soldiers were still scrambling, in condition yellow, to make Infinity ready.

Six immediately swung around, and held up a hand toward John. "That's an Elite over there. He's friendly. Officially a special liaison from the Covenant to the UNSC, although..." She trailed off as John nodded.

"The one in the armory," he said.

Relk was now dressed in loose blue clothing with transparent, wavy cuffs over his gnarled hands. He lowered his shoulders, looked around with his neck hunched. Six waved cheerfully over the back of her chair, but Relk seemed preoccupied.

He had a narrower nose than the Arbiter, although maybe the rest of his body looked skinny simply because he wasn't wearing armor.

"Hello," Six said.

"Hello." Relk stopped a few feet away, looking between the three Spartans as disjointedly as the Mantis. "Jarn."

Jorge said, "John. It's a common name."

Relk said, "I looked you up."

Cortana looked at Relk too, almost mirroring Six's behavior from her seat on the edge of the table. "One Sangheili and the only two hyper-lethal Spartans in the galaxy. I thought that was a bit of an informal description, but nevertheless accurate."

"They do it by numbers," Six said. Whether she approved of this or not did not register in her tone.

"So you two met," Jorge said, looking between Relk and John. Relk hovered around the edge of the group as if toeing an invisible line.

"Alliance between the Covenant and humanity was almost inevitable," Cortana said, speaking what John had been thinking. "The Arbiter began that. Although, not all splinter groups are so obliging."

"The Forerunners guide us on our paths," Relk said.

Six sat back in her chair, wide-eyed. John sank more comfortably into his. One of the benefits of a Spartan-IV training ship seemed to be large chairs. Jorge's stare had gone cold. Clearly, for all the comfort between the three of them, the Forerunners were a tense subject.

Cortana broke the silence. "All right. I'll say it. It's Forerunners we're fighting out there. How do you reconcile that?"

Relk tapped his fingers together and looked at Jorge for support. Six, still quizzical, gave him a nod that seemed to lend him some backbone. "I am a believer. This means I believe. Whether those things that were shooting at us are the Forerunners I believe in...I don't know."

"Agnostics in foxholes," Cortana muttered with a laugh in her voice.

Relk shrugged.

"Where are you assigned next?" John asked the Spartans. Relk bared small, gray teeth, and John saw rather suddenly that it is his masked silence which brought out the warrior in the liaison. John had no answers to give about the Forerunners, though, no consolation or insight that Six, more than Relk, seemed to want. The Librarian's information sat inside of him, as light and airy as the sparks into which Forerunners died. John felt even the Winter Contingency less than the others around him, but he had been in cryo during that first attack, while Six and Jorge were in the thick of it.

"We're still training the new blood," Jorge said.

"I thought that was Palmer's job."

"She's in charge," Six said. "Like Relk, we're officially consultants."

"Why?" John asked. It seemed simple to him that the Spartans should fight if they were able.

"Do you know Jun-A266?" Six asked, never tripping up on the numbers.

John shook his head. "A Spartan-III?"

"Yes. He was in the company before mine - of course, the letters probably gave that away." Six gave a bashful laugh, easier and lighter than John would have expected from her broad-shouldered bearing.

Next to her, Relk lowered hunched shoulders.

Six said, "Commander Palmer knows him. Also something of a consultant."

"Why?"

"Them's the orders."

John could feel how much Cortana wanted to say something, enough that it made him want to scratch at his hair under his helmet. Six hadn't answered the question.

"You saw that we helped with the defense," she said instead.

John nodded agreement.

"Messy job, that was. You did good," Jorge said. "I'm right about outclassed." He smiled. Six patted his knee.

"And do you enjoy it, up here, when it's flying right?" Cortana said.

"Sure." Six leaned forward, elbows on her knees. "There was always some animosity between Spartan-IIs and threes, except on Noble Team. The fours see themselves very differently, but not in the same way." She paused, looked at the floor while she thought about words about which John had few reference points. "They're not competitive, but that's because they don't see other Spartans as in their class."

"Volunteers," Jorge muttered. If he was disdainful or sad, John couldn't detect it in his factual tone.

"They treat us like one of them," Six said, but she looked perplexed, her eyebrows drawn in tight, as if she hadn't intended to say it.

The thought of the other troops reminded John of his conversation with Lasky, his protests and the shock. That felt more important to him than identifying Sarah Palmer as anything more than a senior officer.

"Del Rio told me we were leaving Requiem," John said. For a few minutes he'd actually not had that in the back of his head, not had the suspicion that if he just ran far enough he would get to a world in which the ship was going back for the Didact to finish him while he was still reeling.

"He talked to you, did he?" Jorge said.

John nodded.

"More than he did us. We were waiting for another word from Commander Palmer."

John sighed. Cortana looked at him, waiting for his next reaction.

Instead, Lasky opened the door. Dwarfed by the Spartans, he looked small and neat in his uniform. Four stood when he entered, and four saluted. Relk was already standing and Cortana simply looked, with a level gaze beyond rank. John's own salute felt reflexive, earned as much by the quietly fierce boy Lasky who he had met years ago than by the man standing before him now.

"Chief?" Lasky's young face shone with a thin layer of sweat. "You're shipping out with Gypsy Company."

John said, "Good."

"I'll show you where to go."

"Thank you."

"You sure you can't come with us?" Cortana said to Six. "That would be something."

"Sorry."

"Wait a minute," Cortana said. John turned to watch her, still standing in miniature on the table, rub at her chin.

"Spartan-B312."

"That's me." Six gave a small smile.

"You helped me, once. Thank you."

Six nodded, more solemnly than John had seen from her before.

"Good luck out there," Jorge said to John and Cortana. The AI dissolved a moment later, abandoning her hologram. Her comfortable chill, with its increasingly erratic emotional bursts, remained in his head as it had for years.

He nodded at them although he felt that he should say something more, and followed Lasky out.

The corridors of the Infinity were scarred slightly from the crash, pressure points blackened or walls slightly strained to angles that looked not so much damaged as warped, like the image in a broken mirror. The ship had been made, like a skyscraper, to give in to the elements in order to survive them.

He thought, and Cortana thought beside him, about how differently it looked from the wild jungles of either Requiem or Earth.

And that suggestion that the years were told somewhere, that the code the Librarian had planted in his system had come from a long, long time ago, grandmothers and grandfathers feeling a small alien

shiver or a burst of clarity and aggression.

Others beside him had survived, though, and while he would not make much room for them in the battle-focus into which he would drop later, the mention of the Winter Contingency had begun in him the realization that all he had missed while he was in cryo was not so much a change as a progression, a stormy but long-awaited spring.

End
file.